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Article

The Effects of Poverty and Prison on British Muslim Men Who Offend

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Abstract: Focusing on the lives of British Muslim young men, this article examines the links between their social and economic relations and their prison experiences, desistance, and identity. In understanding the meanings they place on their prison experiences and their social and economic marginalization, the article theorises about social integration, and their place in British society. An intergenerational shift from the availability of local high-waged, skilled, and secure textile work to low-waged, precarious, service work presented them with a series of problems and opportunities, leading them to reject licit wage labour and embrace illicit entrepreneurial criminality. The article concludes that their social and economic relations drove criminal solutions, not ethnicity.

Keywords: young Muslim men; gangs; prison; solidarity; discrimination; hostility

1. Introduction

Drawn from a wider study, this article focuses on the effects of poverty, and particularly their connected prison experiences, on British Muslim young men of Pakistani heritage who offend (the group studied designated themselves ‘The Boys’). The wider, ongoing empirical research project, titled ‘Effects of Poverty and Prison on Identity and Desistance among Pakistani Young Men Who Offend’ (see [Qasim 2018a, 2018b](#)) aims firstly, through studying the life histories and identities of the men, to explore social relations and establish the events and long-term processes that influence their starting and persisting offending, and their move away from crime. Secondly, the study focuses on the distinct social, cultural, and economic context and relations in which their offending and desistance takes place, such as family formation, education, prison and neighbourhood change, particularly long-term shifts in the types, availability, and quality of work. Finally, the study seeks to examine whether and to what extent discrimination occurs in neighbourhood, housing, and work processes influencing young and young adult Muslim men’s scope and participation in the licit and illicit opportunities available to them.

In the course of the study so far, we have concluded that young men’s ethnicity and religiosity has little perceptible direct influence on their offending ([Qasim 2018b](#)). On the face of it, this may seem a surprising finding, given an often-argued link between experiences of social and economic marginalization, ethnic and religious discrimination, and the likelihood of criminal involvement. It is, rather, that although our research population reported being discriminated against as non-white Muslims, this was something they shared generally with law-abiding members of their ethnic group, and discrimination alone did not drive their criminality. We speculate, however, that it remains to be proven empirically and in detail at a future date whether their ethno-religious identity will have some bearing on their putative desistance from offending. Some of the pointers leading to possibility are found in their prison experiences. On the face of the evidence so far, it appears that direct influences on them and on their offending behaviour are similar to those shown among poor young men generally. It was noticed, however, that Muslim religious identity remained a source of resilience and solidarity

in the social life of the study group. Further, as they got older, these men tentatively sought alternatives to their ‘lives of crime’, referring to their ‘better’, ‘purer’, ‘Muslim’ selves wherein lay possibilities that they may be redeemed from criminal pasts.

Again, to provide context for the focus of this article about the influences of poverty and prison on offending, the wider study asks about their experiences of punishment, leaving prison, and ‘being normal’; their offending and drug use; of the role of friendship networks, and of their shared religiosity; the role of intimate relationships and forming families; of schooling, life events, and change; and opportunities and constraints participating in legitimate labour markets and welfare, and criminal markets in goods and services; and finally, of the possibility of being ‘stuck in place’ through benefiting from local support and safety, while experiencing labour market segmentation and discrimination, and concentrated spatial poverty. All of the above factors are considered as potential forms of influence that either encourage or discourage criminality and move individuals either towards or away from crime. In general, the goal of *this* article is to identify opportunities, constraints, and limitations on their place in British society, particularly through their social relations (Weaver 2016; Farrall et al. 2017).

The structure of this article is, first, to delineate the uniquely isolated and segmented nature of Muslim young men’s general experience and profile as a group in respect of their labour market, employment, occupational, demographic, educational, and geographical profile, all factors consistent with a higher likelihood of going to prison. Second, we discuss their prison experiences through the prism of their Muslim identity as they related these experiences to the researcher. Third, we theorise the effects of their poverty and prison experiences on their offending and movements towards and away from offending. Overall, we hope to capture the similarities of their experiences to poor young urban men generally, while conveying what is unique to their social and economic relations as Muslim young men.

2. Muslim Prisoners, Poverty, and Segmentation

The proportion of Muslim prisoners has trebled since 1994 and doubled in size over the last ten years to 10,300. In 2017, over 15 percent of the prison population in England and Wales was Muslim, yet Muslims are only 5 percent of the total population. Fifty-nine percent of Muslim prisoners were aged 15–29 compared with 47 percent of all prisoners. This partly reflects the natural growth of the Muslim population and its young profile, and partly the concentration of prisoners among the young and economically disadvantaged, who are disproportionately Muslim. The overrepresentation of Muslims in prison is less to do with their elevated offending and more their youthful profile and economic deprivation (British Religion in Numbers 2010). Regardless of ethnicity or religion, as Phillips (2012) reminds us, prisons largely contain a population permanently positioned at the bottom of the social structure. The mechanisms by which these populations are in prison are primarily economic, as they are controlled and disciplined as an economically surplused and expendable group.

If the profile of the general prison population is of economically disadvantaged backgrounds, then generally, Muslims are more economically disadvantaged than any other group in Britain. The Muslim group has the highest proportion of households living in poverty, the highest unemployment rates, and is concentrated in the lowest-paying occupations (Barnard 2014; Brynin and Longhi 2015). In 2011, half of Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers earned less than £7 per hour and found it harder to access training and promotion opportunities (Barnard 2014). Despite being relatively poorly educated and poorly skilled, they are still the most likely to be overqualified for their job and are paid less due, no doubt, in part because of discrimination but also due to the fact that as employees they have different characteristics and work for different types of firm compared to white employees (Brynin and Longhi 2015). Their isolation and segmentation from the mainstream labour market was reflected in the views and prospects of the Muslim young men we interviewed. As one of the research participants, Zahir, plaintively stated, the main problem upon release from prison was, “There’s not a lot for me to do now that I’m out. I’m trying not to get back into hustling but it’s harder now. What else can I do to make paper [money]?” This problem, shared with the other participants, is in part about

how mainly poorly educated, unskilled young men survive in a cash economy, a problem commonly recounted across many studies over many years.

In their discussion of the economic marginalization of Pakistanis, they found that high levels of occupational segregation reflect entry barriers to occupations due to lack of information about job options, discouragement, and discrimination. Rather than differences in education or other individual characteristics, outside of large cosmopolitan cities, such ‘ethnic penalties and obstacles’ force Pakistanis to enter insecure self-employment—rather than work as employees, whether in low-skilled or high-skilled occupations—where self-employment is often used as a way of escaping from unemployment or low-status manual work (Brynin and Longhi 2015). As is the case for Pakistanis in the licit economy, so it was among our research participants, committed as they were to a determined form of entrepreneurial criminality as drug dealers and distributors (Hobbs 1988; Hobbs and Pearson 2001). This is more than analogous, as many in the group had close family members involved in legitimate entrepreneurial self-employment. Group members shared other structural characteristics with their ethnic group. The existence of persistent poverty is more prevalent among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis than any other groups, i.e., those falling into poverty find it difficult to escape. Finally, geography matters for the employment outcomes of Pakistanis. Concentrated pockets of unemployment are particularly notable in parts of northern England, including Bradford, for the Pakistani group. Living in such areas has a particularly negative effect on work and poverty rates for Pakistanis. Racism, and the fear of it, restricts access to social networks and can prevent progression at work. It also intimidates people from leaving their own area to look for work or access services (Catney and Sabater 2015), all characteristics shared by ‘The Boys’.

To summarise the social and economic conditions of young Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, they have a higher probability than any other ethnic groups to be paid less than the living wage in all occupational classes. They are the most poorly paid and in the lowest-paying types of jobs. They are therefore most vulnerable to poverty and are substantially worse off than all other ethnic groups on all measures. Finally, these differences are most extreme for men. We are *not* arguing that these somewhat exceptional economic and social group conditions *directly* lead to Muslim young men seeking criminal solutions to resolve status frustration and impoverishment. Clearly the majority do not offend. It is, rather, that these adverse conditions make it more likely that they will seek such solutions through acquisitive and entrepreneurial crime.

3. Muslim Prisoner Experiences

Turning to the experiences that a group of nine British Muslim men had when they were in prison, we pay close attention to the challenges the men faced when they were in prison and the pressures they experienced, particularly around the need to demonstrate solidarity with their fellow Muslim inmates. Populist perceptions cite Muslim prison gangs as a source of intimidation of fellow prisoners and as a group said to control the drug supply, while Muslim inmates are said to experience victimization. Typical of media concerns are headlines alleging that “Prison officers fear that Muslim inmates are taking over control” (The Times 2008), “Muslim gangs [are] imposing sharia law in British prisons” (The Telegraph 2010), and that there are “Growing fears over Muslim prison ‘gangs’” (BBC Friday 2010). Most recently, there was a media claim suggesting that “Islamic extremists [are] taking over UK prisons” (Mail Online 2016). What evidence is there that the promotion of prison ethnic solidarity occurs particularly amongst Muslim inmates?

Existing studies of Muslim prison experiences tend not to be close-up, in-depth, and qualitative, and mostly do not link these experiences to social structure or political economy. Bhui (2009) highlights that “forty percent of Muslims compared to 22 percent of non-Muslims said they had been victimized by staff”. Similarly, Bhui and Nettleingham (2010) found that 46 percent of Muslim prisoners felt unsafe compared with 36 percent of non-Muslim prisoners. Muslim inmates are more likely than their Christian counterparts to be treated unfairly in practising their religion—for example, with regard to

special dietary needs, place and times of worship, and suitable ministers (Burnett and Farrell 1994; Ahmed 2001).

Phillips (2008, 2012) and Crewe (2009) close-up prison studies have shown how prison society reflects the social, ethnic, and territorial relations prisoners bring with them to prison. According to Crewe (2009) study of 'Prisoner Society', the bases and conditions of prisoner social relationships are mostly found in locality, race, and ethnicity. Social background and friendship networks are also important. Coming from the same hometown, occupying similar social positions and areas within comparable cities, common experiences of poverty and addiction, similar criminal background and drug experiences, all oiled social mixing. In relation to The Boys featured in our study, Crewe (2009, p. 330) generalises that:

Convicted drug dealers tended to judge others according to personal wealth and clothing, and found common ground in an antipathy towards authority, a rigid equation of masculinity with strength, a worship of material goods, and a sense of their social superiority.

As far as race and ethnicity is concerned as a source of solidarity and victimization, Crewe (2009) account shows these to be key bases of identification and association; in the case of Muslims, individuals were bonded by rituals around praying, eating, and religious festivals. Visible in the prison's public spaces, Muslim prisoners are the most collectivist and cohesive group, bolstered often by religious-political identity (Phillips 2008). Shared ethnicity did not by any means guarantee identification, cross-cut by other aspects of social relationships mentioned.

Phillips (2012, pp. 22–23) makes a number of general points when discussing 'The Multicultural Prison'. Pre-prison lives are often "marked by family disruption, economic disadvantage, and social and political marginalization. To these experiences are then added the pains of imprisonment." Race relations in UK prisons are defined by the disproportionality of black and minority prisoners compared to their numbers in the population, and failing attempts by the prison service to accommodate diversity. Prisons, nevertheless, can be places where prisoners from different ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds get on with one another. While racist hostility does arise in situations of tension and stress, overall serious black-white opposition or conflict is relatively rare, paradoxically rarer than in the more segregated society outside the prison gates. It is not, Phillips (2012) argues, that relationships between prisoners are not sometimes volatile or violent, it is that these conflicts are less about race and more about masculine assertion based on loyalty to the areas prisoners come to prison from. These areas are likely to be differentiated according to their degree of 'racial segregation' or 'racial conviviality'. Finally, where racism is more likely to occur is in the hidden racism of some prison officers expressed in the myriad of ways prison officers both control and favour individual prisoners and groups of prisoners. These general points by the two recent major English studies of prisons will serve us well as we go on to discuss our own findings.

3.1. Our Study: Methodological Note

One of the authors spoke to and immersed himself within the lives of a social group of British-born Pakistani Muslim men aged between 24–31 years old, living in the city of Bradford (known as 'The Boys'), who had spent time in prison and had been released.

The group was made up of nine young men who had received various sentence lengths over several years or recently. Although offences and convictions differed, most of The Boys had been in prison for selling drugs. Most served their sentences in northern prisons. Some had been to prison on several occasions and several had been released from prison during the course of the study. Outside prison, a great deal of conversation revolved around them detailing the particulars of their prison experiences—who was inside, where they were, with whom, who was released—and reminiscing about their own personal experiences of being inside.

As a final note about the methodology of this study, asking ex-prisoners about their experiences of prison runs the risk that the prisoner will have forgotten some, if not most details, of their experiences

of prison, given that time has elapsed since their release. We balanced this possibility in our study with the difficulties of accessing prisons in situ while the members of our social group were occupants. Besides, it may well be that ex-prisoners can be franker about their experiences when away from the prison. Perhaps of more importance is how the author made contact with a social group of young British Pakistani Muslim men who had been to prison. Essentially, one of us attended the same school and lived in the same neighbourhood as most of the group who were close-knit friends. The ethical and research effect implications of this 'immersion' approach have been discussed elsewhere (Qasim 2018b, pp. 3–7). Well known at school and by neighbours as 'trouble-makers', the researcher witnessed their local contact and conflict with the police. Most of the young men continued to live in the same locality and belonged to the same social group over the seven-year course of the study.

3.2. Credibility and Handling Prison

There was a particular image that The Boys perceived as being necessary to convey and this was to show that they had handled prison with ease, conscious that to openly admit to having found prison difficult could prove to be damaging for their credibility. Any sign of emotional expression was regarded as a sign of weakness, and therefore comments such as, "Man's gotta do his time" and "Prisons were made for people like us" were heard coming from The Boys every so often. Surviving prison, as illustrated in several other studies, was, for The Boys, a test of their masculinity, their toughness, and their 'street credibility' (Sykes 1958; Newton 1994; Sim 1994; Jewkes 2002; Phillips 2012). For one of The Boys, his last sentence was a few years before the study, having served three years for possession of heroin with intent to supply. Bash, like so many of the other boys, would talk of prison as having been 'a piece of cake', recollecting how he had the best 'pad' (cell) on the wing and how it was always full of toiletries. Previous studies have similarly noted that, for an inmate, having a large number of toiletries is in part a display of wealth and power (Crewe 2009).

My pad was the best on the wing, you should have seen it man, I had a sick view from my pad window, I could see half the town, plus I had everything in there, you know my table in my cell was packed with food, toiletries, tuna tins, munchies, you'd swear it was like a little tuck shop in there for me, I was laughing in there. (Bash¹)

This sense of machismo in regard to not having found prison difficult was of great importance in the eyes of The Boys. Any admission that an individual found prison difficult risked mockery by the rest of The Boys or even other young people who lived in the neighbourhood. This was evidenced in many of The Boys encounters and conversations. Any such admission could invite furious responses and damage to reputations.

What emerged from The Boys' responses was the importance of being seen to be able to handle the experience of imprisonment with aplomb. Any implication that they were not able to handle prison with ease would have huge ramifications for The Boys. If it was the case that one of them found the experience difficult, then rarely would he openly admit that in front of the others, as was the case with Ahmed, who opened up to the researcher, sharing his experiences of being inside:

Armley [prison] was fucking shit, it was so depressing man. The screws don't give a fuck 'bout you, they don't care. The food was shit and the bang-up got to me—it was too much for me.

That prison periods were repeated and were longer seemed to make little difference to the degree of difficulty for different particular occasions in prison. Familiarity with prison does not always mean the experience is handled well. Rather, prison occasions fluctuate between resilience, endurance, and psychological damage inflicted by the experience. It can depend on which prison, how they were

¹ All names and incriminating contextual details are changed to protect the identity of the research participants.

treated by fellow inmates and prison officers, and how much support they had from family and friends whilst inside. In Ahmed's case, he was in a prison with which he was not familiar with worse facilities, and in a relationship, which he was fearful of losing.

3.3. *Trouble Inside*

Through conversation with The Boys, it became apparent that whilst in prison, they felt it was difficult to keep away from trouble. One reason for this was because there was a need to stand up for themselves and not to be seen as weak by other inmates, as they were aware that if this was ever the case then they risked being intimidated by fellow inmates. Previous studies have similarly highlighted how exchanges with inmates often serve as tests of nerve and character (Morris and Morris 1963; Toch 1992), with inmates being aware of other inmates monitoring their behaviour so as to judge how able or willing they are to defend themselves (Sykes 1958; McVicar 1974; Boyle 1977; Wortley 2002). Bash started telling The Boys in some detail about a fight which he had with a Black inmate who, in his words, was trying to bully and intimidate him upon his arrival in prison. This led to a violent attack on the alleged bully and time spent in segregation. The Boys, as illustrated by Bash's comment above, felt it was necessary to stand up for themselves when inside, otherwise they risked being targeted by fellow inmates.

The Boys spoke of how there were some inmates inside who would try to intimidate others by outright bullying and by taking their belongings from them and that there were others who would exaggerate and lie about their convictions. Credibility was hugely significant to The Boys, an inverse form of status. The urge for status would lead some of The Boys to boast that they had been convicted of more serious crimes than they had in fact committed, which also served as a source of higher status for them, in the hierarchy of crimes that prisoners hold (Jewkes 2005). However, in some instances hiding the crime that one committed from fellow inmates can be exceptionally difficult for the inmate. This was illustrated when Bash spoke one day of what had happened to a fellow Muslim prisoner when he and other inmates on the wing found out that he was not in for drugs offences, as he had told them, but was, in fact, convicted of rape:

There was this apna [meaning, like us, i.e. British Muslim of Pakistani heritage] guy from down south, and there's this one time we were all on association, and banda [people] were, like, he can't be in for drugs. He ain't got a clue, I mean he's proper saada [simple], but then there was this guy who was in the same prison as him before, and he moved onto our wing, and he tells us that he's a nonce [rapist], so we all pounced on him [attacked him]. They had to move him onto protection.

The idea of defending themselves—defending their religion, family, and friends and being seen as honourable—can be major issues which are factors in types of behaviour leading them to trouble.

3.4. *The Need to Stand by Fellow Muslim Inmates*

The Boys spoke of demonstrating solidarity to one another and also to their fellow Muslim inmates when inside, and it is well documented that the conditions of imprisonment can give rise to close friendships and strong bonds of solidarity amongst inmates (Crewe 2009). Muslim prisoners, as also highlighted by Phillips (2012) study in two British prisons, through their shared ethnicity and religion demonstrated solidarity in what can be termed a hostile environment. Phillips (2012) also highlighted how this solidarity is often inaccurately characterized by some commentators as belonging to a Muslim prison 'gang' culture. The Boys did not feel that they belonged to a gang but rather felt that they were a friendship group that demonstrated solidarity to their fellow Muslim prisoners. One aspect of The Boys coming from a neighbourhood where they knew each other well was that this generated a strong sense of solidarity with their fellow Muslim inmates who lived nearby and who were in the same prison as them. Similarly, Wilson (2003) study in a young offender's institution described how young Black men would demonstrate support and solace to other Black prisoners.

It seemed that this sense of solidarity helped The Boys to look out for, protect, and defend each other. This was illustrated when Ali spoke one day of a fight that took place when he was in prison and how he and other Muslim inmates felt obliged to demonstrate solidarity to a fellow Muslim prisoner who had been attacked by several White inmates.

There was this time when these goras [White inmates] rushed [attacked] an apna [Pakistani inmate] in the showers. They smashed him up big time—should have seen his face, looked proper bad. Anyway, the next day on exercise we seen the gora and fucked one of them up, the screws had to put the full wing on lock down because of it. (Ali)

It seemed that there was an expectation from fellow Muslim inmates whom they knew that they would stick together, and this was something that Ahmed spoke upon his release from prison as at times being a difficult choice:

You go in there, and the boys you see in there ask you if you're down with them. You, like, know in your head that if you're down with them and they get in a fight then you'll end up down block and even an outside charge. But then the thing is if you get in a fight then you need them to be down with you so it's hard, to be honest.

Violence was a relatively small aspect of demonstrating solidarity, as the expectation of support from others in turn meant showing them solidarity and generosity. Ahmed spoke of having met Kamran (one of The Boys) when inside and said how Kamran took it upon himself to look after him:

Kamran was a top lad. When he saw me on Jumma he asked me if I needed anything. He told me he had a phone and if I needed it I could have it. He had kali [hash] on him—it was 'bout a quarter, but the thing is in there its worth a lot more. You know I didn't smoke any of it cuz it had been plugged up [the] man's arse, so I sold it for burn cuz when I came in the canteen had been done, and I had to wait another week till the next canteen.

Prison's ironies and perversities included the fact that while The Boys were often incarcerated for drug dealing, they then proceeded to deal drugs whilst in prison, sometimes outwitting the guards in order to do so. [Crewe \(2009\)](#), in particular, has documented increasing concern with the way in which some Muslim inmates are able to get involved in drugs whilst they are in prison. A number of The Boys spoke of having sold drugs when they were inside, saying that drugs were worth and priced considerably more in the prison. For The Boys, it was second nature to find ways around the system to earn money and to deaden the boredom and anaesthetise the misery of life inside.

3.5. Prison Was Hostile Territory for Muslims

The Boys' experiences of the inside were of hostility and racism. Many of The Boys spoke of having experienced racism, much of which came from other inmates but some of which also came from prison officers.

According to The Boys, there were some prison officers that were blatantly racist towards them and whom they felt did not like them because they were Muslims. This, they felt, was evident from the way in which they were treated by them. There was a strong sense of feeling amongst The Boys that, because Muslims are often depicted as terrorists and responsible for gruesome bombings and attacks, hatred of Muslims within English prisons has sharply increased. Nav spoke of how, when he went into a certain prison which he referred to as 'up north', fellow White inmates would repeatedly shout racist abuse out of their windows at him and other Muslim inmates:

The goras [White inmates] be, like, saying there's another Muslim rapist on our wing and saying we were all groomers and terrorists and that. They'd then be shouting out how Muslims are going to get it [get hurt], but the screws did fuck all. They could hear it but they didn't give a shit to be honest.

The Boys felt that prison officers, as highlighted by Nav's comments, would turn a blind eye to racism aimed at them and other fellow Muslim prisoners by White racist inmates. The Boys, as previously mentioned, felt that prison officers did not like them because they were Muslims. Ahmed and Salman were discussing their time inside when Salman started talking about a particular prison officer who he recalled as disliking Muslims.

'He [prison officer] was always trying to be a funny fucker. He'd open our door the last on visits even when it was Jumma, it'd be like him trying to make us go late. (Salman)

You could see it in their [prison officers] faces that they didn't like Muslims. It was like they were doing their job but at the same time holding back hatred for us. (Jameel)

Similarly, some of The Boys spoke of how they were treated differently to White inmates when in prison. Ahmed described how all the good jobs would be given to White prisoners and Muslims would have 'the shitty jobs'.

'They [prison officers] didn't trust us lot and wouldn't dare give us lot jobs with any kind of like responsibility, like cleaning jobs on the wing and that but nah all we'd get were jobs like being stuck in a classroom doing education or some other shitty jobs in there. (Ahmed)

One of the earliest British studies ([Genders and Player 1989](#)) found that ethnic minority inmates were significantly less likely to be employed in the best jobs compared with White inmates. The Boys claims and perceptions variously cited denial of serving their sentences in an open prison compared to worse offending White inmates; double standards by the prison authorities, blamed on racism; finding that once imprisoned, non-Muslim prisoners who had committed equivalent, if not more serious, crimes had received lighter sentences than they. None of these allegations could be independently substantiated by the researcher.

3.6. Prison Helped Increase 'Emaan' (Faith)

A prominent theme that emerged from The Boys' accounts of prison was how many of them became more devoted to Islamic faith whilst they were in prison. Islam, it is mentioned, has a particular appeal amongst inmates, and this is confirmed by the seemingly high rates of conversion in prison ([Ammar et al. 2004](#); [Waller 2003](#); [Spalek and El-Hassan 2007](#); [Hamm 2009](#)).

This was significant because The Boys who went in prison during the course of the study appeared, upon their release, to have become more devoted to Islam and seemingly wished to become better Muslims. Going into prison can be difficult, especially for the first time and for those who enjoyed a lavish lifestyle. The shock of being stripped of all the accoutrements of their status and ostentatious wealth—cars, clothes, and such like—added to this stress. Religion, it seemed, offered them a feeling of purpose and comfort. As a coping strategy in difficult times (see also [Liebling and Maruna 2005](#)), Salman spoke of how he would pray in prison to help him relax:

I used to pray loads when I was inside. I used to have a proper good routine. I'd read Quran every day. I remember I used to even wake up for Fajr [sunrise prayer], I used to tell the night screws to wake me up. If I missed my Salah [prayer] I'd be all stressed, but then when I prayed it was like a buzz for me. But then when I got out it all changed. I mean, I did, like, read Quran and that for a while, but then slowly things changed, I started chilling again. I forgot 'bout my deen [religion].

This pattern of heightened devotion, then relapse, was repeated among the others. The newly-found devotion that The Boys would find inside did not tend to last after release from prison. A number of them spoke of slowly seeing this devotion fade, and they no longer prayed as often as they did. This is a common research finding ([Maruna et al. 2006](#)). However, when inside prison, religion offered purpose, routine, and a certain ritual, which also served to stave off boredom.

There were, however, more intangible benefits of prayer and faith too in the forms of dignity and distraction from worldly worry combined with reflection about the meaning of their lives inside and outside, as well as offering a means of making the most of a difficult situation. As a local Imam has said, seclusion helped Muslims increase their devoutness; he was able to give explicit examples of people who were in prison. Increased faith in prison though may have had more significance than perhaps these more pragmatic considerations allow. This can be seen in the ways The Boys' increased devotion to Islamic faith when inside was because of a realisation that their lives were rooted in doing considerable wrong and harm, beginning, perhaps, for some, the germ of desistance processes in the hope that they can be forgiven for their past crimes (Maruna et al. 2006).

I knew if I repented for what I did, Allah would forgive me. I knew it's not, like, I killed someone. Look, everyone deserves a second chance, nobody's perfect, and Allah says in the Quran 'turn to me and ask me to forgive you and I will forgive you'. (Ali)

Feeling that they were 'better Muslims' inside compared to when they were on the outside, despite their attempts to continue using drugs, other temptations such as drinking alcohol or womanising could not be indulged. This 'splitting' sufficed to provide a rationalisation that may have, however temporarily, given them pause for thought.

4. Theorising Muslim Poverty, Desistance, and Crime

Under no circumstance or under any conditions did The Boys refrain from subsequent post-prison offending. From The Boys' accounts of prison, what becomes obvious is that prison has not been the reason for desisting from crime, nor does the thought of going to prison frighten them. If anything, prison was considered by The Boys to be a place to make better contacts with drug dealers from other towns and cities that were also inside. This point was brought to the surface by Jameel, who spoke of being worried when he went to prison for the first time but then realising when he got there that it was not as bad as he had anticipated, and of later making a number of contacts with fellow Muslim inmates who sold drugs and who he was able to buy drugs from upon his release from prison.

Having focused on their retrospective prison experiences there seemed a need, inferring from The Boys accounts from this and wider aspects of the study, to go beyond their 'thick descriptions' of their lives, to explain why they were likely to continue offending and returning to prison.

The modus operandi of The Boys cycling between prison and neighbourhood was their participation in local drug markets. Release from prison and re-entry to their neighbourhood meant that they faced certain unavoidable economic and cultural imperatives that underlay their difficulties. In effect, these amounted to material survival and the need to uphold status and respect (cultural survival). As such, their individual experiences of being released and returned to prison can be firmly placed within social and economic relationships found outside the prison. The Boys were only too aware of the disappearance of the relatively unskilled woollen textile work they might normally have entered. They knew this because their fathers had told them. One of The Boys, Nav, spoke of how he felt when he first learnt about his father's death when he was in prison, and how hard he had worked in Bradford's textile mills:

I couldn't believe it. I was in shock. I jus wanted to be there for my mum and brothers but I couldn't. Them days were tough for me. I felt like I could kill someone, that's how angry I used to be. All I used to think about was my dad and how hard he worked to make life easy for us. I was, like, proper down for ages.

Stating our argument baldly, for the young men studied here, fluctuations over their lifetimes in the demand for (unskilled) labour among their ethnic group creates conditions of life and standards of living whereby economic necessity, in many cases, trumps moral affiliation, and criminality can become a means of economic survival. Consequently, policing and penal sanctions are required to ensure that individuals are unable to sustain a living by criminal means and are deterred from tempting to try.

If from the perspective we have chosen, to contextualise the young men's accounts and experiences, their prison experiences are coercive ancillaries to the labour market, which they reject on account of its offer of poor work. The coercive element is that prison is meant to create conditions of life markedly more unpleasant than those experienced by those among their peers readier to accept poor work.

These pains of imprisonment serve to treat these young men according to the public sense of the real harms they trade, particularly the symbolic messages sent to the law-abiding public, widely supported within their marginalized milieu. For us, however, their struggle on release from prison to maintain healthy family relationships, find suitable work, and refrain from further offending, continued to be decisive whether the cycle of release and return was broken or compounded by social and economic relations beyond the control of either themselves or the publics.

Some of these theoretical observations follow from our study and what The Boys told us, albeit indirectly and implicitly. We were, however, somewhat impressed by the current bleakness of The Boys' position in British society and the seeming indifference towards that condition by authority, except to discipline those who 'refuse' poor, precarious, and low status work, especially those considered superfluous to changes in the demand for labour. In neutralising and warehousing the most disruptive and harmful elements, state authority is affirmed and repressive penal and welfare policies are legitimised. For us, 'problem' or 'surplus' populations are bound to risk imprisonment if their life chances and employment options lack improvement due to policy indifference.

As [Wacquant \(2001\)](#) argues in another context, these 'dispossessed and dishonoured' young men are 'entrapped' in a 'deadly symbiosis' between prison and ghetto, while rejected by the deregulated labour market. The growth in the male British Muslim population—connected to the growth of drug offences—makes it likely that The Boys will continue to be caught up in the penalization of the 'Muslim question' in Britain: a question of the chronic economic marginalization and isolation of this young ethnic group. The symbiosis between neighbourhood and prison observed as a structural feature of the carceral and welfare system by [Wacquant \(2001\)](#) is relevant here. [Farrall et al. \(2010\)](#) have argued that studying desistance needs to go beyond proximate influences, such as family links, employment prospects, and moving away from criminal friends, towards a consideration of changes in social structures in the fields of employment, families and housing, and criminal policy, as these too might facilitate or impede the social integration of ex-offenders to society.

[Farrall et al. \(2017\)](#) later work is quite explicit about this. They point to the enduring impact of the social and economic changes begun in the UK in the early 1980s, a period of radical economic restructuring over two decades, leading to lasting social change—the sorts of change that profoundly influenced the prospects of Muslim young men who were brought up in places like Bradford, where our research participants live. As they saw their fathers made unemployed from previously relatively well paid, secure, and skilled jobs in the collapsing textile industry, dependent on welfare benefits, or, if lucky, moving to poorer taxi and restaurant work, their upbringing was of sudden, then persistent, poverty.

In attempting to gauge the effect of these combined social and economic processes at the national level, they assess the extent to which such social and economic 'storms' (individually and collectively) weakened bonds between individuals, within and between families, and across communities. Combining measures of economic and social changes and processes with crime and victimisation rates, they found that crime was related to these social structural 'storms', although ultimately driven by economic variables. As the authors suggest in places like Bradford, The Boys' 'hometown', the intensity and speed of the changes that occurred presented a shock to those who lived there, and whose futures were sacrificed to economic orthodoxy ([Farrall et al. 2017](#), pp. 235–236).

The processes of change themselves took time to be completed, and when completed then endured, becoming the 'new normal'. Even so, the speed with which the restructuring took place would have felt, for many people within the communities affected, quite rapid. Jobs (and futures) which appeared certain for many would have started to appear less concrete and then to disappear within a decade or less.

They also show how political decision making can shape long-term trends in crime rates. For us, nevertheless, Muslim young men and adults are more likely than is the case for other groups to be ‘stuck in place’ (Mah 2012) in declining occupational and residential areas, limiting their choices and movements.

5. Conclusions

To develop further Farrall et al. (2017) account of social and economic change and the impact of these changes on community cohesion, “the UK economy has suffered the changes that have also happened in many other economies due to globalization”. While predating the digital age (e.g., branding), patterns of economic globalisation mean that wealth is no longer in physical capital such as factories, pipelines, or retail outlets—in places. Big capital is not anchored to specific jurisdictions or locations. This pattern in turn accelerates social polarisation. The ‘rise of the intangible economy’—a form of capitalism without capital (Haskel and Westlake 2018)—has greatly increased the sorts of youth inequalities discussed here, based, in part, on a digital and educational divide. Similarly, while some sorts of capital, such as finance, become ever more mobile and seek profitable opportunities somewhere else, fixed and physical, place-based capital and labour (land, factories, offices, housing, infrastructure and local labour forces, including old and new migrants) suffer geographical inertia and sclerosis. Surplus capital unwilling or unable to find an outlet for profitable investment, alongside soaring underemployment and unemployment, leads to the abandonment of people and places, generating surplus or marginalised populations composed of disproportionate numbers of minorities and poor Whites. (Harvey 2006; Mah 2012).

Just as being ‘stuck in place’ is viewed as a key mechanism of concentrated disadvantage across the generations (Sharkey 2013), we can see that successive generations are being forced to adapt or resolve these downturns in fortunes, with some attempting to seek redress and progression through education, others through the informal or criminal economy. This is a recipe for entrenched inequality and profound frustration among excluded young people and communities that felt left behind on the march to globalisation. Intangible capitalism generates what Haskel and Westlake (2018) call ‘inequality of esteem’—a chasm between haves and have-nots that goes beyond affluence and opportunity, in an economy plagued by low wages and job insecurity. Haskel and Westlake (2018) conclude that the different dimensions of long-term rising inequality—of wealth and earnings, between the generations, of place, of esteem—are all driven by the rise of intangible investment, dividing those having the particular skills and education to manage intangibles and be open to experience from those stuck in place, abandoned by mobile and intangible capital.

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